

# Tipiṭaka Studies Outside Myanmar

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## 1. Playing God: Choosing what is Right or Wrong

Before we delve into the different ways of learning and studying Tipiṭaka, let's first discuss the scope of the text under study. Differing texts provide the student with a variety of advantages, and disadvantages, in their study. For example, historical texts can be easier to study because of the stories and trustworthiness contained within, however leave little space for making one's own hypothesis or suggesting modifications. On the other hand, memorizing philosophical poems may be found easier because of the rhythm and rhyme, but may include much opportunity to misunderstand the meaning. In other words, let's first examine the object before we move on to the method.

The Teachings of the Buddha were verbally rehearsed during the First Buddhist Council and all the subsequent texts are supposed to be in line with it. All scriptures of Theravāda Buddhism which are universally accepted as valuable and worthy of study, are in the Pāḷi language, the language most probably spoken by the Buddha Himself. The original script of the language did not survive and therefore each Buddhist country has applied its own writing system to the textual form of the language. Thus, although we have scriptures from different Buddhist countries with almost the same text, the same content and similar pronunciation, each of the countries preserves the texts in their own script; Burmese in Myanmar, Thai in Thailand, Sinhalese in Sri Lanka, and so on.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the Sixth Buddhist Council decided what scriptures are to be considered as part of the proper Theravāda literature. A large number of texts were included and incorporated into the canonical Pāḷi literature. The Sixth Buddhist Council led to the international approval of categorizing the Buddhist scriptures into three main layers:

(a) Firstly, *Mūla* (the main text), which mostly comprises the Buddha's and Arahants' wisdom as shared during the First Buddhist Council. It is also known as the *Tiṭṭaka*, literally the "Three Baskets", and comprises of the *Sutta Piṭaka* (the collection of the Buddha's discourses), the *Vinaya Piṭaka* (the code of monastic discipline), and the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* (the essential Teachings of the Buddha)

(b) Secondly, *Aṭṭhakathā* (the Commentaries), the explanations, stories, and metaphors rooted in the uncanonized knowledge of the great masters who attended the First Buddhist Council, then enriched by a large amount of information gathered over seven or more centuries, finalized by the famous Venerable Buddhaghosa in the fifth century AC.

(c) Thirdly, *Ṭīkā* (the Sub-Commentaries and Sub-Sub-Commentaries), written mostly in the first half of the second millennium, partially by Sinhalese monks and partially by Burmese.

Although the Sixth Buddhist Council inserted the previously non-canonical *Milindapañhā* into the *Mūla* (Main Text) and *Visuddhimagga* into the *Aṭṭhakathā* (Commentaries), there are still many, many other texts which didn't find their place in the three layers. These include *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* (known as Thin-Gyo in Myanmar), *Jinaṭṭhapakāsaṇī Ṭīkā*, *Satthubimba Sutta*, *Sārasaṅgaha*, *Suttasaṅgaha* and *Catubhāṇavārapāḷi*, to name only a few. The fact that these texts are not included in the three strata of Pāḷi scripture says nothing about their veracity. Some of them are faithful selections of discourses from the acknowledged texts. Some of them paraphrase or give more detail on the *Mūla* or *Aṭṭhakathā*.

When we talk about studying Buddhist texts, we need to keep in mind that all those texts are worth reading and studying. They are revered as carriers of the Buddha's Teachings, the preservation of the pure Dhamma wisdom, and the correct and complete guide to the Liberation from the Cycle of Rebirth.

I believe that deciding on the value of each text is the crucial point at which students get wrong views or incomplete understanding. Each teacher and each group of scholars select their favorite texts and give them special importance while sometimes criticizing or rejecting other texts. I noticed that in western countries it is fairly widespread to reject the Commentaries, Sub-Commentaries, and even parts of the Main Text, such as *Abhidhamma*, *Apadānapāḷi*, and *Buddhavaṃsa*. Their logic is based on assumptions of materialist, nihilist scholars – and ignoring or even being unaware of their attachment to such views, they promote only those texts which are in line with their selection of certain assertions of certain scientists. The words I use are strong, but I believe that they point at an important issue. Materialism is the assumption that only matter exists, not mind. Nihilism is the rejection of next life, and attachment to views is the inability to accept ideas which do not fit into the "box" of their own beliefs.

Consequently, such scholars play God in selecting what is right and what is wrong, limit study resources and support bias toward unsupported assumptions. In this way unnecessary arguments arise, and with them much hate, envy, quarrel, and enmity within the single community of Theravāda Buddhists. All that just because some scriptures are prioritized and some others are condemned.

I would like to take this opportunity to show how the Burmese attitude toward the scriptures is much more suitable in the long run when preserving the Buddha's Teachings and the correct and effective understanding of wisdom and the path toward wisdom. In Myanmar, all Buddhist scriptures are highly revered and studied as much as possible. In fact, the Buddha Himself implied, that all Buddhist texts have the same essence, namely that they support the progress on the Path toward Liberation from all suffering:

*"Seyyathāpi, pahārāda, mahāsamuddo ekaraso loṇaraso; evamevaṃ kho, pahārāda, ayaṃ dhammavinayo ekaraso, vimuttirasō."*<sup>1</sup>

"Suppose, Pahārāda, that the great ocean has a single taste - the taste of salt; indeed, in the same way, Pahārāda, this Teaching and Discipline have a single taste - the taste of Liberation."

Some scriptures which seem to summarize the rest or give clear explanation are studied first and then, with the basic knowledge and understanding, the students are encouraged to read and learn further information from anywhere in the wide range of Pāli sources.

## 2. Dogmatic Attitudes in Studying Tipiṭaka and an Appeal for Sincerity

Knowledge about Buddhism started to penetrate the Western hemisphere only a few centuries ago, and the people researching it were Christian and materialist, nihilist scholars. Studying scriptures of a religion that one doesn't follow has both advantages and disadvantages. On one hand there might be an objective point of view, free from attachment to views and expectations, but the cultural and historical background of that belief system, and the experience of following the religion, may be missing.

I would like to show that the objective view often easily ascribed to scholars outside the religion is only an illusion. The western scholars, strongly impacted by views and discoveries of their own esteemed philosophers and scientists, compared the Buddhist Teachings to ideas and ideals which themselves needed scrutiny.

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<sup>1</sup> *Aṅuttara Nikāya 8 2.9. Pahārāda Sutta*; slightly different wording occurs in *Khuddaka Nikāya – Udānapāli – 5. Sonavaggo – 5. Uposatha Sutta* and *Vinaya Piṭaka – Cūlavaggaṇṇapāli – 9. Pātimokkhatthapanakkhandhakam – 2. Mahāsamuddeatthacchariyam*.

It is very common that information which doesn't come up to the materialist-nihilist views of modern scientific hypotheses is immediately rejected and dismissed as phantasmagoria and irrelevant information. This attitude has a profound impact on how the scriptures are viewed and how their historicity is assumed.

For example, with the assumption that nothing like a heaven exists, it was easy to reject the idea that *Abhidhamma* was taught by the Buddha in heaven. This consequently dismissed the possibility that the Buddha Himself taught *Abhidhamma*, and thereby its historic value. By dismissing the existence of heaven and gods the Buddhist scripture most revered in Myanmar has been turned into irrelevant philosophizing of speculative monks. The scripture which, in my opinion as well as in the opinion of the ancient Commentaries, contains the deepest wisdom, which embodies the Buddha's greatest Teachings, has been rejected and dismissed, simply because it didn't fit into the narrow views of those who studied it. This is only one of many such examples.

Western scholarship of Theravāda Buddhism has produced two outcomes – first, there are selections of the texts which fit well into the already existing views of the scholars and which are deemed presentable to a public biased by current scientific hypotheses. Then there is an open research of the texts in their original form, studying everything without distinction, more as the art of literature than as anything to enrich the reader by wisdom or useful information.

The picky trend in presenting Buddhist scriptures to a trusting, unfortunate public nevertheless led a number of men and women into Asia to become monastics. However, while many of these are open minded and keep investigating their current views and broadening their perspectives and understanding, some of them retain their preconceived views which they previously adopted from western scholars, and with those views continue studying and following the sacred texts of the Buddhists. As a result, all around the world large communities appeared, where important parts of *Tipiṭaka*, such as *Abhidhamma*, are never studied, nor the reading of even encouraged. Commentarial literature is rarely available to students of these monks and the Commentarial knowledge is not commonly known. If ever mentioned, it is commonly rejected immediately when it doesn't fit their current belief system.

This *is* a problem.

Whether we believe something or not, it is, in my opinion, unethical to discourage study and prevent knowledge. The scriptures of *Tipiṭaka* and the Commentaries were written by knowledgeable monks, accepted by hundreds of thousands of great masters, and even greater numbers of monks benefited from the information on the path to purify their minds from

greed, hatred, and ignorance, to develop genuine love for all beings and to attain stability in peace and happiness.

Denying sources of knowledge to their students, some western scholars teach a fragmental version of the path to liberation rather than a comprehensive and complete path in the way the Buddha has shown to us. We need to acknowledge the truth as it is. Deluding ourselves with the idea that scholars know everything and are always unbiased is not useful for anything. Scholars do not know everything and commonly stay biased. In fact, western scholars of Buddhism rarely ever question the background of their attitudes and beliefs.

I am well aware of the unpleasant way in which I am sharing my feelings. However, this is not from a wish to offend the Western audience or to create any dissension between the West and East. Rather I would like to encourage the Western audience to disprove my sincere feelings about their attitudes. I wish that the Western scholars and students of Buddhism to reduce their conceit, open themselves up, explain the standpoints from which they study the Buddhist texts and show the reasons for the positions they take.

Do they think that, with a strong view that heaven and gods do not and cannot exist, their understanding of the Buddhist scriptures written with the undisputed understanding that heaven and gods *do* exist, is giving them complete freedom in studying the scriptures without any preconceived bias or dogma?

Is there any way how they can prove that the scientific hypotheses, those which they accept in contrast to those which they do not accept, are worth attachment at any cost? Would they, at least, reveal *what are* the scientific dogmas with which they study the sacred texts and what scientific dogmas they have rejected, and why?

Why do they think that the dogmas which they attach to while studying the scriptures, have no impact on the resulting theses, papers, books, and lectures which these scholars then produce? Obviously, certain beliefs, upbringing, and conditionings will always play a role in assessing a text. The point is that the author's standpoint should be clearly mentioned *before* they reject an ancient scripture as worth studying. We can read in scholarly reviews various ideas about the historicity of certain texts, but the authors won't reveal their standpoint - such as that they don't believe in heaven etc. - because such information would disqualify the author among those who believe otherwise.

In the field of comparative religion, we learn that studying religion as its follower as well as somebody outside, brings a lot of advantages and disadvantages. The attitude of Western scholars is widely varied, but rarely revealed to the reader. I believe that unlike in the Buddhist countries, where people are open to whatever the scriptures say, learn it, try to understand it, compare it, and make their utmost efforts to examine the wisdom found therein, in non-

Buddhist countries, in the West, understanding the variable background of the author is essential for understanding their reviews and conclusions made based on their studies. It is easy to understand that a Christian scholar or a materialist-nihilist will reject *Abhidhamma* as the Buddha's word, because they don't believe in existence of a multitude of gods, and they don't believe that such gods would obediently listen to a human being. Unfortunately, scholars commonly do not reveal their beliefs and attitudes before they present their conclusions, and with the variety of different theories the helplessly trusting public is subjected to confusion as to whose opinion is unbiased and whose is biased.

### 3. Critical Thinking or Faithful Memorizing – Which is More Important?

When we compare the Western and Eastern styles of studying texts, we can see two extremes. In the East, likewise earlier in the West, the common way of studying was by memorizing. The teacher prescribed a number of texts to memorize, and the students then, during the examination, recited them by heart.

With the advent of modern education, in the way the Czech Jan Amos Comenius and the Swiss Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries suggested and explained, in the West the rote memorization method gradually decreased to minimum and was replaced by an emphasis on intellect, critical thinking, learning through one's own experience, and the promotion of creating new ideas shaped the education system we have now in the West.

Unfortunately, the Western system, in my opinion, has gone too far in critical thinking at the expense of correct knowledge of source-information. When the requirement to memorize the basic texts was removed from the education system, the opportunity for nonsensical ideas, fallacies, and idiocy increased by simply disregarding details, or sometimes even important points from the source text. As a striking example we can mention the philosophy of "Flat Earth societies". Studying little, but thinking too much, these adult people concluded that the Earth is flat, and the experience of it being spherical is only an illusion.

The Western downfall of the ability to retain information in its original form has resulted in unnecessary disputes, controversies, and conflicts. In the field of Comparative Religion, some Western scholars have caused a huge amount of misunderstanding and distortions – not intentionally - but just because they failed to memorize the source text and missed out details which were in fact important.

The Asian system of education suffers from the opposite extreme. Rote memorization is a kind of learning that doesn't involve thinking, reflection, or analysis. Although a number of great monks in Myanmar, such as Ashin Mahā Rāṭṭhasāra and Sayadaw U Janakābhivaṃsa

suggested that critical thinking should be incorporated in the scriptural studies, most of the institutes of monastic education seem to disregard those suggestions. We could easily ask – how many students in Myanmar monastic education ask questions during the classes? How many hours every week are students encouraged to engage in debating the studied texts?

The disadvantage of restricting studies to rote learning is that the memorized information is not easily connected to the real situation, and in case of insufficient explanation of the memorized text there is an opportunity for misunderstanding, argument, and conflict. Understanding the memorized text and training in application of the memorized text to the real situation is essential in the fulfillment of the educational process.

To answer the question whether critical thinking or faithful memorizing is better, I'd say that memorizing is the basis and critical thinking is the development of the base. One without the other will cause unnecessary conflict. Critical thinking without memorizing leads to nonsensical assumptions and loss of time and energy in applying them. Memorizing without critical thinking leads to knowledge through blind faith and the ironic situation when knowledge is present but without skill to apply it.

#### 4. The Challenges Faced by Buddhist Universities

As a graduate student of the Buddhist and Pali University of Sri Lanka, I will share with you results of my observations based on my experience in that university and other universities which I have visited and heard of in Sri Lanka.

Sri Lankan Buddhist Universities try to match the standard of western university education - in the prestige of the awarded degrees, and consequently by the system and quality of the education. Studying at a Sri Lankan Buddhist University is very similar to studying a university in the West, especially with regards to the emphasis on critical thinking. The students who only memorize the teacher's words simply do not pass their examinations. That is because the examination paper requires the knowledge received from the teacher, its critical assessment, additional knowledge from other sources, and also one's own substantiated opinion.

The students arrive at a two-hour lecture in which the teacher explains a topic from the curriculum. Sometimes the teacher writes notes on the whiteboard to help the students understand the main points of the topic. Students coming from traditional schools where they learned about Dhamma by rote memorizing, need those notes very much. They copy those notes from the whiteboard into their notebooks and with the help of relevant books they try to learn them, understand them, and create their own opinion.

Copying notes from a whiteboard is the method of education in western primary schools, not universities. However, it is certainly a good step on the way from rote learning toward gathering notes from continuous speech. Those students studying at a higher, Masters level do not get the opportunity to copy from the whiteboard. They are led to follow the true western university style, where they simply write notes of what they've understood as worth noting, while the teacher is speaking. These notes are then further enriched by their knowledge of reading books, Internet search, and own conclusions.

The exclusiveness of critical thinking in Buddhist universities has however brought about a lot of damage to the purity of the transmitted information. Because the students are not led and required to memorize larger parts of the original text they are not able to distinguish what kind of ideas about the source-texts and the original philosophy are aligned with the sources - and which are fallacies - due to imperfect reading of a source. The information received from a wide variety of books and authors is then affecting their view about the source text, and without the ability to spot mistakes and misrepresentation of the authors the students themselves attach to fallacious ideas and spread them further. Excluding memorization from the educational process, the technique of critical thinking has led many graduate and post-graduate students to ill-conceived ideas, creating unnecessary dissent in the Buddhist community, conflicts, loss of the appropriate respect for the original texts, and disruption of peace and harmony.

It would be much more successful if Buddhist universities all around the world apply both the requirement of memorizing as well as critical thinking. The degrees awarded to their students would then lead to multitude of excellent scholars, whose ideas support harmony and understanding, respect toward the texts and opportunity to attain true wisdom.

## 5. What Can Be Done?

In the Buddha's Teachings there are three levels of wisdom –

- (1) *Sutamayipaññā*, which is the wisdom attained by listening to the knowledge shared by a teacher or a friend, or simply by studying and memorizing.
- (2) *Cintāmayipaññā* are the conclusions and realizations reached through thinking and pondering over the knowledge which was received by *sutamayipaññā*.
- (3) *Bhāvanāmayipaññā*, is then the wisdom attained by development of mental purity, observing the reality as it is, in line with and through the help of the *sutamayipaññā* and *cintāmayipaññā*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Khuddaka Nikāya – Peṭakopadesa Pāḷi – 7. Hārasampātabhūmi*



Studying and memorizing *Tipiṭaka* is the first of the three levels in wisdom, the *sutamayipaññā*. Critical thinking about the memorized text is *cintāmayipaññā*. Finally, applying the knowledge and understanding in one's meditation practice leads toward the attainment of the highest wisdom, *bhāvanāmayipaññā*.

Nowadays the first two levels of gaining knowledge are aptly applied by a number of educational institutions around the world. It would be very helpful if the two are mindfully balanced, so that the students can successfully protect and promote the correct instructions and explanations which lead to the attainments of supernatural wisdom, equanimity, purity of mind, and genuine love toward all living beings.

May all beings be happy and healthy 😊

monk Saraṇa